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Adult Access to Higher Education in Western Europe: What Part does Vocational Experience Play?

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Abstract

Adults without proper university entrance qualifications often have in fact a significant advantage: they can draw on vocational experience. This factor is acknowledged in various schemes of adult access to higher education. Recent examples from Austria, Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Sweden have been selected for this paper. Three aspects are looked at in particular: the relevance of vocational qualifications for access to higher education, the function of vocational experience in adult access to higher education, and factors determining current trends in adult access to higher education. Finally, the transnational stimulus of the access schemes is discussed.

1 Introduction

The demand for adult access to higher education is not new. An OECD study on *Adults in Higher Education* in 1987 drew attention to substantial deficits in this area. In 1991, the *Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community* stated, too, that little progress had been achieved so far in providing equal chances of access to higher education to adults during the whole of their working lives, higher education systems and policies being still mainly geared to the needs of the young school leaver (Commission of the European Communities: § 29). More recently, a conference organised by the European Access Network (Council of Europe & European Access Network 1994), which involves academics and professionals aiming at an expansion of access to higher education in countries across Europe, also called for more initiatives in order to widen access for underrepresented groups, these including adults with vocational experience.

Adults, in this context of deficits, could easily be regarded as the problem group of the *underprivileged*, *non-traditional* students lacking proper entry qualifications. This paper tries to put adult students in a *more positive perspective*, concentrating on an essential advantage most of them have, namely vocational experience.

The starting point for the following analysis is the recent political debate in Germany about a new evaluation of vocational qualifications and experience in regulations concerning access to higher education. There has been an obvious contradiction: Even though the demand for advanced vocational training and lifelong

continuing education is widely stressed, also in the light of international competition, the value of vocational qualifications and experience for access to higher education is far less recognised than in most other highly developed countries (Kluge, Scholz & Wolter 1990: 16).

Awareness of this problem has led to an initiative, supported by the Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, to investigate adult access to higher education in other West European countries. The point at issue is less to identify recent patterns and trends as such than to establish which of them are likely to provide a stimulus for Germany. In the wider context of this study, the question to consider is how a transnational stimulus can be derived from a comparative analysis of educational provision.

In this perspective, schemes of adult access to higher education in five European countries - Austria, Britain, France, the Netherlands and Sweden - will be analysed. The evidence is largely based on studies prepared by national experts, or in co-operation with them, concerning the problem of equivalence between general and vocational education (Manning 1993) and specific issues of adult access to higher education (Manning 1994).

The target group of „adults“ in this context could be defined, based on an analysis by Ulrich Teichler (1990: 34), as *students with several years of practical experience, but no regular pre-university education, who have full student status and intend to acquire an academic qualification*. Three aspects in particular need to be looked at:

- the relevance of vocational qualifications for access to higher education,
- the function of vocational experience in adult access to higher education,
- factors determining current trends in adult access to higher education.

Other important issues such as the use made of vocational experience once adults have embarked on a higher education course will have to be left to further investigation. Finally, the transnational stimulus of the access schemes will be discussed.

2 The relevance of vocational qualifications for access to higher education

A general problem concerning adult access to higher education is the traditional divide between general education, with its close links to academic studies, and vocational education and training.

In order to overcome this gap, various schemes in several countries have paved the way for entry into higher education via vocational routes. These links established between the two sectors provide an important context for the access to higher education of adults with vocational experience. Institutions which accept candidates with vocational qualifications are more likely to grant access to adults with practical experience than institutions with a more traditional concept of entry to higher education. In addition, adult candidates who are equipped with vocational qualifications have the chance of taking up studies on that basis, particularly in higher education systems which have a broad parttime provision.

The Figure 1 below indicates the major points of access to higher education on the basis of vocational qualifications.

Figure 1: Access to higher education on the basis of vocational qualifications (VQ).

<i>Country</i>	<i>University institutions</i>		<i>Non-university institutions of higher education</i>	
Sweden	högskola			⇐ VQ
Britain	university	⇐ VQ	college of higher education; central institution	⇐ VQ
France	université	⇐ VQ	grande école; section de technicien supérieur	⇐ VQ
Netherlands	universiteit		hoger beroepsonderwijs	⇐ VQ
Austria	Universität		Fachhochschule	⇐ VQ

: transfer possibilities for students

: transferability of credits plus transfer possibilities for students

Access on the basis of vocational qualifications is well established in the vocationally orientated, mostly non-university institutions of higher education. It also operates in diversified university sectors (France/Britain/Sweden). However, in „dual“ systems of higher education, as in the Netherlands and Austria, universities are not accessible via this route. Instead, technical institutions of higher education serve as an alternative.

3 The function of vocational experience in adult access to higher education

The OECD study mentioned above identifies several types of regulations applying to adult access, by which the degree of openness of higher education systems is characterised. One of these types is defined as adult access with practical experience. In the present contribution, an attempt is made to differentiate further between various access schemes taking account of the relative role played by vocational experience.

Vocational experience ranges from specific vocational competence, including relevant qualifications, to general work and life experience. Partly connected with this, vocational experience has a variety of functions as regards access to higher education. Four *key functions of vocational experience* can be distinguished:

- Vocational experience in the context of general ability,
- Vocational experience as a formal precondition,
- Vocational experience as an individual achievement to be assessed,
- Vocational experience as part of a preparatory vocational course.

In the following survey the access schemes can only be described briefly, concentrating on the specific function of vocational experience.

I Vocational experience playing a part in the context of *general ability*, but *not as a precondition* for access

This is typical of the Open University and the access courses in Britain. Adults are entitled to enter the Open University irrespective of any previous qualifications; however, a lot of its courses require specific knowledge, and students are able to build on their vocational experience as well.

Access courses which prepare adults from the age of 20 for university level studies have been introduced at a great number of British institutions and in a broad range of subject areas, mainly in the social sciences. Many of them draw on previous knowledge and experience which the participants can offer. In this way, vocational experience makes up a useful component of general ability.

II Vocational experience as a *formal precondition*

Examples are the special entry examinations for adults in a number of countries, often combined with preparatory courses, such as the ESEU (examen spécial d'entrée à l'université) in France, the colloquium doctum in the Netherlands, and the Studienberechtigungsprüfung in Austria. Applicants have to show that they have had a certain number of years at work, either in a proper occupation or in some other employment or, in some cases, running a household.

A quite different scheme operates in Sweden, which grants access to higher education, without an entry examination, for people at a minimum age of 25 and with at least 4 years of work experience („25/4“). This general entitlement to entry is, however, partly restricted by specific requirements, including certificates in academic subjects, set at particular institutions and in certain subject areas.

The Swedish scheme is backed up by the considerable value attached to work experience in access to higher education generally. If applicants outnumber places, a selection process is operated which takes account of work experience. In addition, practical knowledge and skills are expected for entry to several study programmes. Also involved in the scheme is a voluntary aptitude test developed particularly for applicants without formal entry qualifications and taking account of experiential learning. This is, in fact, a feature of the following function (III).

III Vocational experience as an *individual achievement to be assessed*

The following schemes actually evaluate vocational experience as part of a wider spectrum of abilities. Apart from the Swedish aptitude test, there are assessment procedures which have been developed in Britain and France in two ways:

- as an acknowledgement of certificates, credits and documents that provide evidence of educational and vocational experience, e.g. the Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS) in Britain (with certain variations between England and Scotland);
- as an assessment of knowledge and ability including special tests, also used in the context of staff development in big firms. The method is known, for instance, as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). This evaluation of experiential learning is used as a component part of more flexible access schemes, for instance the CATS (Britain). Another example is the regulation in France, under the Décret of 1985, which provides access to universities for adults without traditional entry qualifications if they have interrupted their initial education or training for at least two years. This scheme centres on the assessment of individual competence, including vocational experience gained in paid or unpaid work or on practical assignments. A more recent regulation, the Décret of 1993, extends the recognition of prior experiential learning further.

IV Vocational experience *as part of a preparatory vocational course*

In an *informal* way, work experience often is a component of vocational courses, especially those provided on a parttime basis. They may qualify for access to higher education as mentioned under the first section (Figure 1) above.

A *formal* route has been introduced in Austria. The advanced technical institution (Fachakademie) offers vocational courses on a parttime basis for skilled workers. The courses are closely linked with the participants' occupational work, thereby allowing for the immediate application of knowledge and, also, for systematically drawing on practical experience in the course of the learning process. Their successful completion leads to an advanced vocational qualification and, at the same time, counts as a direct preparation for the university entrance examination (Studienberechtigungsprüfung).

The following Figure 2 summarizes the schemes according to the function of vocational experience outlined above. It also sets out the specific forms which the schemes represent, including entry entitlements, preparatory courses, examinations, or courses at special institutions. As can be observed, the functions of vocational experience are relatively independent of the forms of access schemes.

Figure 2: The structure of adult access to higher education without formal qualifications.

<i>Character of the scheme[®]</i> <i>Function of vocational experience⁻</i>	<i>Entry entitlement</i>	<i>Preparatory course</i>	<i>Examination/evaluation</i>	<i>Institution</i>
<i>I</i> <i>in context of general ability</i>		<i>Access course (B)</i>		<i>Open University (B)</i>
<i>II</i> <i>formal precondition</i>	<i>„25/4“-scheme (S)</i>	<i>prep. course[®]</i> <i>prep. course[®]</i>	<i>colloquium doctum (NL)</i> <i>ESEU (F)</i> <i>Studienberechtigungsprüfung (A)</i>	
<i>III</i> <i>achievement to be assessed</i>			<i>Décret '85/'93 (F)</i> <i>CATS (B)</i> <i>APL (B)</i>	
<i>IV</i> <i>part of vocational qualification</i>		<i>Fachakademie (A)</i>		

A = Austria, B = Britain, F = France, NL = The Netherlands, S = Sweden; ESEU = Examen Spécial d'Entrée à l'Université, CATS = Credit Accumulation and Transfer System, APL = Accreditation of Prior Learning.

4 Factors determining current trends in adult access to higher education

If the access schemes are grouped according to the time of their introduction, two phases of development emerge:

- up to the early 70s, coinciding with the first wave of expansion of higher education in response to the demand for equal access to this level of education,
- since the mid-80s, characterised by efforts to develop human resources in a broader and more efficient manner.

Schemes referring to vocational experience as a formal precondition for special entry examinations date back to the 70s and earlier. They include the ESEU in France, the colloquium doctum in the Netherlands and the Studienberechtigungsprüfung in Austria, offering new opportunities to a small number of high-calibre candidates who, for some personal reason, have not followed the traditional route to university studies.

An alternative approach was initiated in the 1970s, with the British Open University and the Swedish scheme („25/4“). They favoured broad terms of access for a wide range of potential entrants, including those with vocational experience.

A new series of schemes emerged from the mid 1980s onwards, including the access courses in Britain, the schemes assessing achievements the Décrets of 1985/1993 in France and CATS/APL in Britain- and the Fachakademie in Austria. They allow for greater flexibility in granting entry to higher education, and also for new approaches in drawing on previous learning and vocational experience.

The more recent schemes, since the mid 1980s, tend to attach greater importance to vocational experience. Several factors determining this trend can be distinguished.

(I) Starting out from changes in the work process, the concept of qualification has changed as well. In vocational education and training, the focus is now more on competence (rather than specific skills); and action-orientated skills gain in importance in contrast with the hitherto dominating knowledge-oriented skills.

This reassessment of the value of vocational qualification provides a new impetus for considering it as equivalent - although different in character - to general education. This approach also has a stimulating effect on broadening access to higher education for people with vocational experience. One example of this development is the Fachakademie.

(II) Connected with this new attitude towards qualifications is the greater attention paid to the individual. This arises out of increasing emphasis placed on individual responsibility in the workplace, and a general need for individual adaptation to changes in work and society.

The role of the individual is reflected in new procedures for assessing educational attainments, also at the point of access to higher education. Particularly important forms are

- qualitative methods of assessment, including the actual evaluation of vocational experience (as against just its formal recognition). Examples are the APL and the procedures under the Décrets 1985/1993, and also, to a certain extent, the aptitude test in the „25/4“ scheme;
- newly designed preparatory courses which are geared to the needs of individuals, with their specific abilities and experience. The access courses in Britain stand out as an example.

(III) Responding to the interrelation between education and the world of work, that is, to the pattern of alternating phases of learning and working, education structures are being made more flexible- including the establishment of modular courses and systems of accreditation.

This provides a framework for acquiring and accumulating various types of qualification, also acquired alongside employment, as part of the process of gaining access to higher education. In this context, adults with vocational experience need no longer be treated as a distinct group, but rather as part of a heterogeneous educational population. An example is the scheme CATS.

5 Transnational stimulus

These recent schemes since the mid 1980s, which take account of vocational experience in several ways, open up extended prospects for adults to gain access to higher education. They have employed varying degrees of acceptance and success in their national context (details of which cannot be provided in this paper), and could be a stimulus for other countries as well.

Care is needed, however, in considering any transnational application of the schemes presented. As has been argued in a wider context, „comparative research in education should take into account the historical, political, social and cultural settings of particular systems and aspects of them“ (Phillips 1989: 269). Referring to the present analysis of adult access, special attention should be drawn to two aspects of the educational system taken as a whole.

One aspect is the *legal framework for access to higher education*, particularly universities, which varies from country to country.

In Austria and the Netherlands, for example, access is strictly regulated in terms of qualification and is combined with a right to study. In such a system, access schemes for adults are bound to be strictly defined as well, i.e. by a standard entry examination. In Britain, on the other hand, there are general national entry standards, but the universities are autonomous and have the right to select applicants and even set the terms of entry standards for themselves. In this context, schemes with only broadly defined requirements, such as the access courses, make sense.

Figure 3 sets out the two relevant features of the legal framework of access to higher education: the access rights of qualified applicants on the one hand, and the selection rights of institutions on the other. Presented in general terms, the interrelation of the two features stands out: where there are unlimited access rights of applicants, based on strictly defined qualifications, these are matched by minimal selection rights of institutions; where there is a variety of entry qualifications, with no direct right to access, this is linked with maximum selection rights exercised by the institutions.

Figure 3: Access rights versus selection rights in higher education.

<i>Country</i>		<i>Access rights of qualified applicants</i>		<i>Selection rights of institutions</i>
Austria/NL	↑↑ ↑↑	unlimited entitlement / strictly defined qualification	↓↓ ↓↓	no selection rights
Sweden	↑↑ ↑↑	general entitlement	↓↓ ↓↓	part selection rights
France	↑↑ ↑↑	restricted entitlement	↓↓ ↓↓	extensive selection rights
Britain	↑↑ ↑↑	no entitlement / variety of qualifications	↓↓ ↓↓	full selection rights / determination of entry standards

↑↑ ↓↓ direction from minimum to maximum rights.

This juxtaposition affects adult access, which ranges from narrowly defined special regulations (e.g. Austria) to a diversity of access courses and recognition procedures (e.g. Britain) - dependent on the respective national framework.

Another aspect is the *structural context of education*. There are schemes, for instance the CATS in Britain, which depend on a flexible, modularised structure of post-compulsory, i.e. further and higher education, providing various ways of transfer. In several other systems there is, as yet, little room for this kind of flexibility and choice. The Austrian Fachakademie, on the other hand, is linked to a dual education system, i.e. possessing two fairly separate sectors of academic and vocational education; it could be relevant for countries with a similar structure.

6 Conclusions

These comparisons suggest that the particular forms and structural links of access schemes vary considerably between countries. The essential conclusions, therefore, should be derived from the basic trends which underlie individual schemes. At this more abstract level, the following characteristics, particularly in the more recent schemes of adult access to higher education, can be identified:

- the recognition and assessment of prior learning and vocational experience acknowledging certificates, etc., but also evaluating the knowledge and skills gained outside the framework of formal qualifications;
- the extended provision of preparatory courses- already associated with entry examinations - designed in such a way that individual ability and experience can be taken more into account;
- the development of courses of further vocational education that integrate the acquisition of the ability to study and, thereby, offer such adults a chance of gaining access to higher education.

These are the characteristics that could be taken over irrespective of the different conditions in national education systems between countries. Yet the characteristics can be considered and evaluated only in the concrete form of the national schemes. Such an evaluation has to cover not only the regulations as such but also how they actually operate in the country concerned- a dimension exceeding the capacity of this present paper.

This interaction of basic characteristics and individual schemes seems to be essential if a transnational stimulus is to be derived from a comparative study of adult access to higher education.

Notes

1. This contribution is based on a paper presented at the 16th CESE conference at Copenhagen in June 1994.

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